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SERMON,

PREACHED

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 1796,

BEING THE DAY APPOINTED FOR

A GENERAL FAST.

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GENERAL EAST

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BY THE

REV. JAMES BURGESS, A.B.

OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE; AND VICAR
OF GREAT MAPLESTEAD, ESSEX.

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR F. AND C. RIVINGTON, NO. 62, ST. PAUL'S
CHURCH-YARD;
AND R. FAULDER, NEW BOND-STREET.

1796.

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PREACHED

ON WEDNESDAY, MARCH 4, 1852.

BY THE REV. JAMES BURGES, A.B.

A GENERAL FAST



REV. JAMES BURGES, A.B.

OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE; AND VICAR

OF GREAT MARLBOROUGH, ENGLAND.

LONDON:

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CHURCH-LANE.

AND E. FLUDD, NEW BOND-STREET.

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SERMON.

✓ JONAH iii. 4. *latter part.*

YET FORTY DAYS AND NINEVEH SHALL BE
OVERTHROWN.

NINEVEH, we are informed, *was an exceeding great city—the wickedness of its inhabitants came up before God—and Jonah was sent, by divine command, to cry against it, and denounce its overthrow. We are moreover told, that when the prophet entered the city, and began to foretel its destruction, the people believed God, proclaimed a fast, covered themselves with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.*

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THERE

THERE is not, perhaps, any part of sacred history that is more applicable to the present state of our own country, than that to which my text belongs. I have therefore chosen it for the subject of our meditation, this day, as it affords us, at once, a most awful instance of the denunciation of God's displeasure at the sins of a people: and a wonderful proof of his forgiveness, if they *turn from their evil way, and from the violence that is in their hands.*

AND first it shall be my endeavour to point out some of the particulars, in which we may be justly compared to *Nineveh.*

DURING a period of more than a thousand years, *Nineveh*, the capital of the *Assyrian* empire, extended her conquests and her commerce over the east. The beauty, the wealth, the magnificence of this city had long attracted the notice of strangers, and flattered the pride of her citizens. Secure at home

home and formidable abroad, her empire, as it was founded the first, seemed, to all human appearance, destined to remain the last. Long too has *Britain* sat as a queen among the nations. She too has carried her commerce not over the east only, but every country, every clime has been explored by her fleets; and the riches of the earth brought home to her ports. Long has she attracted the admiration and excited the envy of the world. Her empire too had seemed to bid defiance to the machinations of pretended friends, and to the malice of open enemies. But *Nineveh*, amid all her blessings, forgot the Author of them. In the days of her prosperity she rebelled against Heaven, and impiously provoked the displeasure of the most High. In vain did she trust to her bulwarks: in vain did she hope to resist the arm of Omnipotence. Her destruction was decreed in Heaven: and Jonah was sent to *cry against* her, and declare her approaching ruin. And has not *Britain* too forgotten the all-

bounteous source whence her blessings flow?
 Has not she, in the days of her prosperity,
 forgotten Him, who alone *sendeth prosperity*?
 Shall she then hope to escape the just judgments of an offended God? And is there no warning voice sent to caution her *to flee from the wrath to come*? Yes, my countrymen, the present times admonish us in language strong and forcible as that of the prophet sent from God. The Christian, attentive to *the signs of the times*, traces the hand of Providence now directing the affairs of mankind to some awful crisis. He seems to hear the voice of God himself in the events around him; and with profound reverence is ready, at times, to enquire, Whether the alarming sentence may not ere long be pronounced—*yet forty days and THIS OUR Nineveh shall be overthrown.*

TERRIFIED at the dreadful denunciation of the prophet, and at once convinced of God's justice and their own iniquity, the *Ninevites*
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did not pause to question, or presume to doubt, the authenticity of Jonah's mission. They did not seek to exculpate themselves, and charge the calamities with which they were threatened to the misconduct of their rulers. No; they instantly *proclaimed a fast. The decree of the king and his nobles commanded, that neither man nor beast should eat bread or drink water, but should cry mightily unto God.* Under circumstances at once similar, and equally alarming, we too are called together, this day, by the wisdom and piety of our king and his counsellors, "to fast and humble ourselves before Almighty God, that we may obtain pardon of our sins, and avert those heavy judgments, which our manifold provocations have most justly deserved."

IN order to promote this pious and salutary purpose, permit me, in the second place, briefly to suggest some of the signal favors, which God has from time to time bestowed

upon us: that in proportion as we discover the goodness of God manifested in our behalf, the more truly afflicted we may be under a sense of his displeasure. And these I shall consider, as they respect our spiritual and civil concerns,

BEFORE the Christian Religion was established in this island, the inhabitants, like the other nations, who had not been blessed with a revelation of the true God, were sunk in a gross and barbarous superstition, which taught them to conciliate the favor, or avert the anger, of their deities, by the sacrifice of human victims *. But when they had embraced the beneficent doctrines of the gospel, like the other converts to Christianity, they exchanged the savage habits of a state of nature, for the humane, the amiable manners of the followers of Christ. In proportion as the pure religion of Jesus influenced the

* Vide Henry's History of Great Britain, Vol. I. p. 112.

minds,

minds, and guided the conduct of our ancestors, so did their moral, their social, their political state amend and improve. But when the precepts of Christ gave way to the injunctions of man; when the letter, not the spirit, of the gospel was attended to, and enforced; and the ways of righteousness perverted into ways of gain, thick clouds of darkness overwhelmed the face of our island. At length, by the labours of the reformers of our religion, the sun of the gospel of Christ again shone forth in meridian splendour,—we trust, with the favor of Heaven, to set no more.

BLESSED be God we now possess a religion pure in its principles, and plain in its precepts. What gratitude do we owe our forefathers, who ventured, at the expense of their lives, to stem the torrent of religious corruption. Let us not forget, that there was a time when the scaffolds streamed with blood, and the flames raged to purify the religion we profess.

Let us call to mind the sufferings of the young and the old of both sexes, in defence of that religion, which some among us would reject and despise. We have been so long accustomed, through the blessing of Heaven, to worship the God of our fathers in peace and security, that we are apt to overlook the price at which this invaluable privilege was purchased. Let us then, while we commemorate the fortitude of our forefathers under affliction, persecution, and death, for the cross of Christ, look up with gratitude to our Almighty Father, who enabled them to suffer for our benefit, and transmit to us a religion pure as the source from which it springs;—the greatest, the best blessing we enjoy.

NOR are we less indebted to our heavenly Father for the happiness we derive, as members of society, from the equal protection and security afforded us by the constitution of the government under which we live.

LET

LET any one read the history of this kingdom during those periods, when the natives, harassed by successive invasions, either fell a prey to the fury of their invaders, or were driven to seek safety on barren mountains and inhospitable deserts. Let him trace the outlines of a system, established at the Conquest, which, however humiliating and galling to its immediate objects, called forth the glorious exertions that marked the conduct, and should immortalize the memory, of our ancestors in the cause of rational liberty. Let him view our civil liberty from its birth, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, and observe its slow yet gradual progress, amidst the foreign and domestic broils which rent our island and deluged her plains with blood, till, at length, after the struggles of the last century, it was settled and secured on a firm and solid foundation. Let any one, I say, contemplate this goodly fabric—this boast—this bulwark of Britons; founded in civil commotion, reared in adversity,

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fity, and cemented with blood: and if his heart overflow not with gratitude to God and respect for the memory of his ancestors, he must be destitute of those feelings, which most ennoble man, and most exalt him in the scale of beings.

THESE are the benefits, these the mercies we derive from Heaven: but have we proved ourselves deserving of them? Has the use we have made of a pure religion and rational liberty corresponded with the intentions of our ancestors? Have the inhabitants of this hitherto highly-favored isle been distinguished for piety and due submission to the laws? Have they lived up to the precepts of the religion they profess? Have they acted conformably to the dictates of that liberty, which they pretend to idolize? Have not many, too many I fear, testified by their *actions*, that they believe, what the fool only *said* in his heart, *There is no God*? And do not some, under the specious and plausible pretext of reform-

reforming our condition and equalizing our rights, entertain, and with an effrontery equalled only by the malevolence of their intentions, publish sentiments subversive of all social order, and destructive of every blessing, which the goodness of God and the exertions of our forefathers had transmitted to us? Are there not some, who would exchange that constitution for which our ancestors bled, and under which our fathers lived happy and secure, for the wild and visionary theories of our *pretended* Reformers? It remained for the *wisdom* of this age, to call in question all they could not fully comprehend: and because they could not explain the dealings of God with man, at once to deny His authority and revile His holy word. It remained too for the *candour* of our Reformers, when they found their schemes frustrated by the salutary laws of their country, and the wise precautions of our rulers, craftily to vilify and traduce a constitution, the best, perhaps, which legislators ever framed: and, could they succeed
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in throwing off the respect and obedience it claims from reason and duty, they would substitute in its place their own crude systems of *liberty* and *equality*, which, as far as experience has shewn, have ended, indeed, in liberty to plunder and murder with impunity, and produced only equality of misery and distress.

WOULD these Reformers of mankind prove their sincerity by beginning with themselves, some credit would be due, at least, to the purity of their intentions. Would every man, before he undertakes the arduous task of reforming the world, look to himself, and root out any seeds of vanity, of malignity, of ambition that may lurk in his own breast, the work of reformation would be less wanted and more practicable. But when we see men, whose lives and writings tend to weaken the sanctions and loosen the obligations of all laws divine and human, erecting themselves into judges to

try

try the merits and investigate the mysteries of our holy religion—when we see such men presuming to amend or alter a constitution, which the wisdom of ages planned and the testimony of ages has proved to be most beneficial—when we see them holding out to the inifinformed, the indolent, the depraved part of the community, the delusive hopes of bettering their circumstances by resistance to what they term oppression—is it not our duty, as men, as christians, to suspect the integrity of their professions, and by every means to guard against their machinations?

To obtain the assistance of Heaven in opposing the principles of such men, we have this day, in common with our Christian brethren throughout the realm, put up our solemn prayers to Almighty God. “ We have prostrated ourselves before Thee, O Lord, in earnest prayer and supplication in behalf of ourselves and other Christian nations exposed, at this time, to the cruelty, or groaning under
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the oppression of Apostates from Thy truth, and Despisers of Thy holy Name—We have praised Thee for past, and implored future blessings on our sovereign—And we have” moreover, “ prayed, that the scarcity and dearth, which we suffer for our iniquity, may be mercifully turned into plenty and cheapness.”

ON each of these petitions I shall make some observations: and first we have implored deliverance from the horrors of war.

AND here let us not lose our time in unprofitable disputes, whether the present war was at first offensive or defensive, just and necessary, or wanton and unprovoked. Our rulers, who doubtless were better acquainted with the views and designs of our enemies than any of us can possibly be, deemed the war expedient: and surely it cannot be their interest or wish, wilfully and unnecessarily to involve the nation in the horrors of war.

Never,

Never, perhaps, was a war begun under circumstances more awful, and teeming with more important consequences to the *Christian* world in particular, and to mankind at large, than the present. A great and powerful people, long goaded by the iron rod of Despotism, were seen breaking their chains and in an instant bursting, as they imagined, into liberty. Strangers to the sweets of true freedom, and ignorant of its just bounds, Humanity, while she drew a veil over the first excesses of their enthusiasm, rejoiced in the hope of their deliverance; and *Britain*, who had long possessed what *France*, then, appeared likely to acquire, cordially sympathized in the prospect of her emancipation. Happy had it been for *France* had she known properly to prize the jewel! But when her boasted liberty, instead of gratitude to God, and blessings to her country, proved at once a source of impieties to Him, and of misery to herself and the world around. When, having dissolved the ties of morality and religion,

religion, murdered her king, and abjured her God, she had exercised on her victims cruelties unparalleled in the history of nations. When she attempted to kindle the flames of civil discord in other countries, by diffusing those principles of licentiousness, of disloyalty, of irreligion, which had occasioned such lamentable excesses in her own unhappy land—could *Britain* tamely sit still and see her laws, her liberties, her religion fall a prey to the machinations of her frantic foes? Was she to be an unconcerned spectator of the havoc and destruction with which these merciless invaders threatened the nations of the earth? No; we should have been guilty of ingratitude to God and to our country, had we not armed in defence of our dearest and best rights—in defence of whatever contributes to solace and adorn social life. We waged not war to extend our territories; to gratify our pride or resentment. We took arms in defence of our country, our laws, and our religion. And if it has pleased God in
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his wisdom to prolong the contest, and for the punishment of our sins to oblige us to expend more blood and treasure in this most important of all wars, let us, in humble adoration of the Supreme Disposer of events, submit and say, *Thy will be done.*

If it be asked, What have we obtained by the conflict? I hesitate not to answer, We have obtained the object for which we armed: and we trust we shall, through the goodness of God, secure the continuance of it. We have hitherto, by the blessing of Heaven and the bravery of our fleets and armies, repelled the attacks of the enemy. And if we have not been victorious on all occasions, we have gained our first object; we have saved our country from the destruction that hovered over it. But for our exertions, under Providence, our island ere now, perhaps, had been a prey to anarchy and civil war—her rich and fertile provinces a dreary waste—her inhabitants, robbed of their property and torn from

the bosom of their families, bleeding on scaffolds, or compelled to fight the battles of their frantic invaders—in a word, our houses had been desolate; our churches heaps of ruins!

AND shall we not raise our voices in thanksgiving to the throne of God for these unspeakable mercies? Shall we shut our eyes on this wonderful display of Almighty goodness? Shall we, insensible of the horrors of war, because happily placed at a distance from the roar of cannon and the fury of battle, cease to pour forth our grateful praises to the God of Heaven for having kept these evils far from us? If we are not engaged in fighting the battles of our country and risking our lives in her cause, let us, while pursuing our occupations in security, far from those scenes of rapine and bloodshed which at this moment disfigure a part of Europe, often call to mind the dangers we have

have escaped, the mercies we have obtained, the happiness we enjoy.

BUT how must we be shocked, in common with our fellow-countrymen, when we hear of wretches, lost to every sense of humanity, of justice, of every principle of moral and religious obligation, daring to assail the life of our gracious Sovereign? How must we feel, when we see our King, at once the parent of his country and the pattern of every virtue, exemplary as a prince, amiable as a man, exposed to the fury of a lawless rabble? How can we hope that the Lord of Hosts will fight our battles, and crown our labours with success, when there are some among us who would violate our laws, trample under foot our religion, and by shaking that PILLAR on which the entire fabric is supported, involve the whole in one tremendous ruin! Let us put up our prayers to Almighty God, “ that He would guard our Sovereign against secret conspiracy and open

violence: that He would be pleased to turn the hearts of those men who wantonly fought his life; that they may repent of their ways before they fill up the measure of their iniquity."

IN addition to the common evils of war, it hath pleased the Almighty to withhold from us that supply of some of the necessaries of life, which has usually been so amply and abundantly furnished to us. On this important subject let us endeavour to entertain right notions. Let us not be eager to impute the dearth, we feel and lament, to the avarice of one set of men, or the knavery of another. Let us not be forward to charge it to the account of the war, or to any *one* cause in particular. It is, perhaps, were it necessary to trace its origin, the result of a concurrence of circumstances which no human prudence could foresee — no human power prevent. It is, however, an evil we suffer not only with the country at large, but with a considerable

part of Europe ; and as such let us bear up against it with the fortitude of Britons ; with the confidence of Christians. Long nursed in the lap of prosperity, our cup and the cup of our fathers had overflowed with the good things of the land : in these days it is a hard matter to eat our bread sparingly, and to seek sustenance from those fruits of the earth, of which, however, let us be thankful, God in His mercy hath sent ample supplies. But do we, who live in a Christian country and profess christianity, want to be told, that ourselves and our affairs are under the guidance of an Almighty Power, who “ knoweth our necessities before we ask and our ignorance in asking ? ” Let us cease then to murmur at the dispensations of Heaven. Let us rather, should our wants increase, redouble our exertions. Let us not waste our precious time in idleness, in riots, in destroying the fruits of the earth ; and increasing, by our criminal misconduct, the very evils we complain of, and which we
had

had foolishly thought to remove. Let the rich continue their bounties to the indigent. Let them ever be disposed to *deliver the poor that crieth, and the fatherless, and him that hath none to help him; and the blessing of him that was ready to perish shall come upon them.* Let the poor on their part be thankful to Heaven for the comforts they derive from the liberality of the rich. Let them behave themselves lowly and reverently to their superiors; diligently and faithfully do their “duty in that state of life unto which it hath pleased God to call them.” And *blessed are the poor in spirit* — blessed are the poor, who, with patience and resignation to the will of God, cheerfully and conscientiously do their duty here — *for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.*

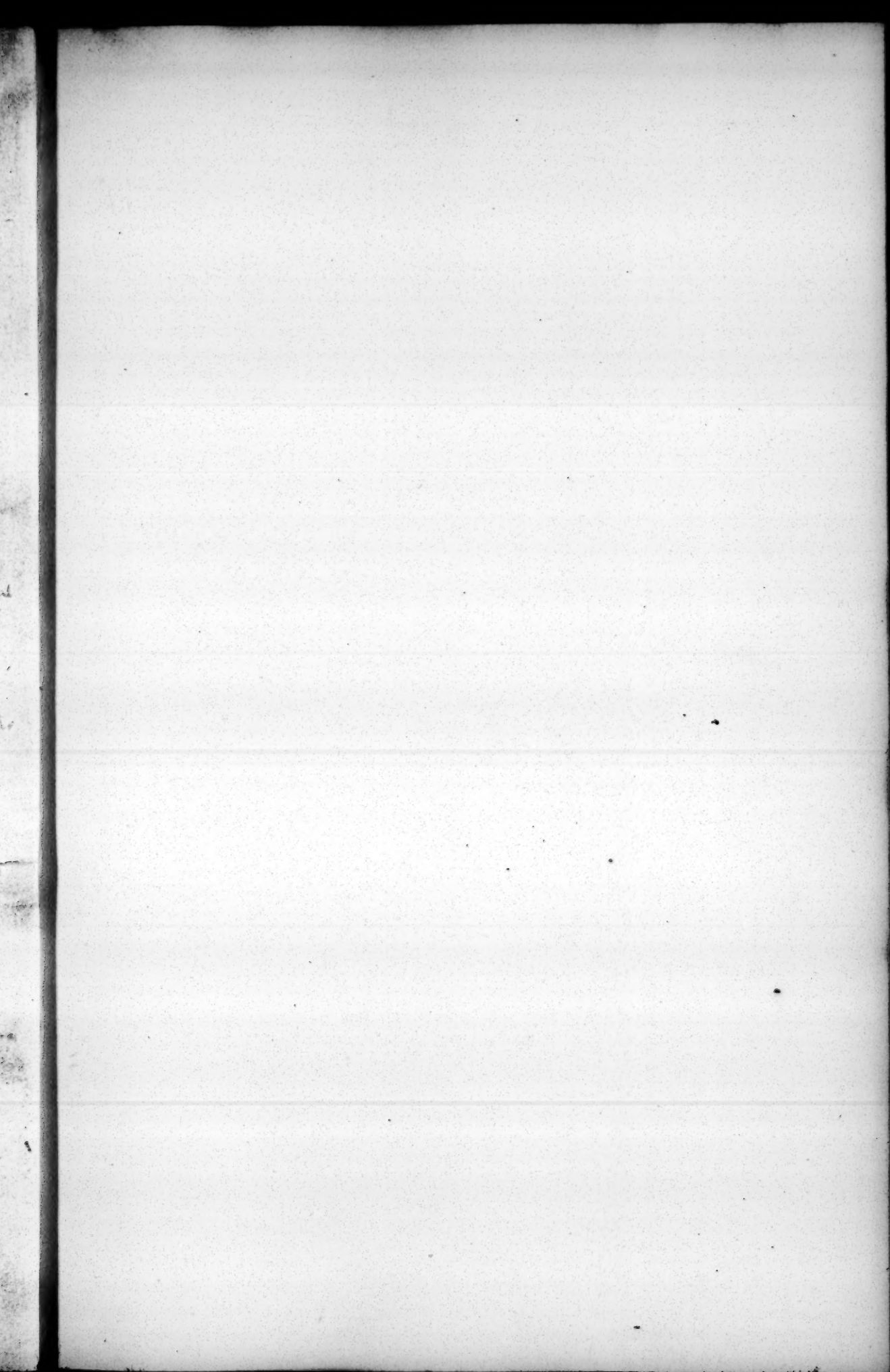
To conclude. When we trace the resemblance between *Nineveh* and our native land: when we consider the many and valuable blessings which result from our civil and religious establishments: when we recollect the dangers which threaten them, from the efforts of our enemies at home and abroad: when we reflect on the ungrateful returns we have made to God for all his benefits—do we not seem to hear a warning voice, calling on us to repent and deprecate the judgments of God that are now abroad in the earth? Have we not too much reason to fear, that the awful sentence may go forth—*Yet forty days and THIS OUR Nineveh shall be overthrown!*

WOULD to Heaven the resemblance between *Nineveh* and ourselves may hold throughout! After the solemn and dreadful threatening of the prophet, we are informed, that *the king and the nobles, the rich and the poor, covered themselves with sackcloth and cried mightily unto God. And God saw their works,*

that they turned from their evil way; and God repented of the evil that he had said that he would do unto them, and he did it not.—Let us then, one and all, cry mightily unto God. Who can tell if God will turn and repent, and turn away from his fierce anger that we perish not? Let us humble ourselves before the throne of grace; and, lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness, implore the protection of Almighty God upon our country. Let us earnestly and devoutly beseech Him to pardon our iniquities—to give success to our arms—to restore and perpetuate the blessings of Peace and Plenty to ourselves and our latest posterity. Amen. Amen!

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